

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

PEPPERELL

Report Date: 1980

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

The activity that is the subject of the MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20240.



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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: April, 1980

COMMUNITY: Pepperell

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rolling, occasionally rugged upland terrain. Glacial outwash features dominate with some rugged and rockier areas in western section. Generally a gravel soil. A few small upland ponds, several small brooks and Nissitisset River all flow into meandering Nashua River.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Area known as Nissitisset. Set off as Second or Groton West precinct, 1742. Established as District of Pepperell, 1753. Incorporated as Town of Pepperell, 1775.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural industrial town on periphery of western axis to interior highlands. Located along Nashua River with important tributary of Nissitisset at regional ford site; suspected native occupation along valley terraces and Gulf Brook. While a corridor for regional highways, settlement was delayed by frontier wars until mid-18th century. Town center located on highlands above river valley with rapid expansion of farming and mill activities through early 19th century. Town center located on highlands above river valley with rapid expansion of farming and mill activities through early 19th century. Western interior retains several well-preserved Georgian and Federal houses, including early high-style brick examples around Heald Pond area; also brick schools. Industrial expansion at Babbittasset Falls on Nashua with railroad connections to New Hampshire during mid-19th century creating mill village of East Pepperell with modest period houses of Victorian design, some commercial structures and brick factories along river axis. Town center retained civic functions through early 20th century while agriculture and textile manufacturing declined leaving well-preserved historic landscapes in western highlands and authentic industrial fabric in East Pepperell. Suburban development of southern New Hampshire is gradually altering original character of rural uplands, while town center remains preserved from pre-Modern period with covered bridge (replica) and early gas stations.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located in Nashua River valley with tributary stream from surrounding highlands. Area served as intermediate traverse for trails along the Nashua, including conjectured routes as the Nashua Road (Route 111) from New Hampshire to presumed ford site over Nissitisset at Four Corners and west as Hollis-Main and Jewett Streets to Heard Pond and the Gulf, although route location is only approximate. The primary east/west route from Groton across the Nashua ford follows Robinson-Bancroft Brooks as South Road and Larkin Street (Route 119) with branch presumed as Shattuck Street to Heard Pond and the Gulf. It would appear logical that a trail followed north/west along the Nissitisset, perhaps

along axis of Brookline Road. A cross link along Nashua west Bank is assumed to follow axis of Elm Street to Greens Brook. On east bank north/south trail is presumed as East Street.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No period sites reported. Sites are probable however on well drained terraces and knolls along both Nashua and Nissitisset Rivers, especially at confluence points, rifts and fords.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to seasonal fish runs in rivers. Freshwater fishing in ponds. Agriculture in riverine lowlands. Upland hunting/gathering.

D. Observations:

Location along primary trails, presence of fords and wide range of resources make this a likely area for Nipmuck related sites.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as local highways with primary route east/west to Groton center as South Road (Route 119).

B. Population:

Some native occupants likely. No colonial settlers.

C. Settlement:

Same as Contact Period.

D. Economic Base:

Same as Contact Period; fur trading.

E. Observations:

Nashua River served as barrier to further colonial development.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of Pepperell town center by mid-18th century creates radial highways from meeting house, including Elm, Shirley, Townsend, Jewett, Heald, Park and Main Streets, with secondary highways as Boynton, Oak Hill Lawrence-Maple, Chestnut, West, Harbor, Reed-Mt. Lebanon Streets by late 18th century. Other roads of the period include Hollis Street from Four Corners. Groton Street from East Pepperell and River Street (Route 11) along Nashua. Covered bridge across Nissitisset, removed in 1960s and replaced by modern timber, steel and concrete replica.

B. Population:

No colonial inhabitants until after 1720. By 1740, estimate of 40 families. Census of 1765 listed 758 people in 130 families and 117 houses.

C. Settlement:

Scattered farms along Nashua after 1720. First meetinghouse built, 1745-49, Main and Park Streets. Second meetinghouse, same location, 1769. Small town center developed around these--first school, 1764; John Mosher's tavern, 1769. Secondary settlement loci around milling areas in North Pepperell, Hollis Street crossing of Nissitisset, and Babbittasset Falls on Nashua (East Pepperell). Increasing numbers of farms throughout town after 1730.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing. Extensive fruit orchards. Some lumbering. Several mills: grist (Gilson) on Nashua (East Pepperell) about 1730; grist, on Nissitisset (at Hollis Street) about 1750; grist and saw, on Nissitisset (North Pepperell) about 1770. Many taverns reported: John Mosher's, town center, from 1769; others noted near mills in North and East Pepperell; additional taverns reported along "Great Road" (South Road) "every two miles"--probably one at Shirley Street and South Road.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Housing mixed between vernacular two-story central chimney houses and a smaller number of central chimney Cape Cod cottages, some of which have mid- or late Georgian style entries. Several high-style houses may have been built in scattered locations including a brick two-story house reputedly built in 1764 (West and Jewett Streets) and, possibly a twin chimney two-story house with corner pilasters on pedestals (North Pepperell-Prescott Street) c. 1770-90).

F. Observations:

Once frontier conditions stabilized after 1730, fairly rapid development as an agricultural and milling area.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain in place with focus upon town center. Improvement of roads to mill village at East Pepperell as Jersey and Lowell Streets and local turnpike on West Groton line as Rines Street.

B. Population:

Population increased by approximately 40% during period. No known foreign-born population. No new religious societies recorded for period.

C. Settlement Location:

Major village at Pepperell Center developed along major roads; small mill villages developed at East Pepperell (Main Street by the Nashua River), at North Pepperell (Prescott and North Streets) and at the junction of Brookline Road and Hollis Street.

D. Economic Base:

Agricultural economy dominant. Earliest papermill, 1818, at Mill Street site by Ben Lawrence. Shoe industry begun 1820s with home production introduced by John Wolcott of Danvers. Joseph Heald mined for gold near Heald's Pond (unsuccessfully).

E. Architecture

Residential:

Range of house types from high-style to cottages. High-style examples may have included one twin chimney Georgian style house at North Pepperell (see Colonial architecture); however, most high-style houses appear to have been built in the Federalist style during the second decade of the 19th century at Pepperell Center. Several of the most elaborate Federalist style houses share nearly identical designs with low hip roofs and corner pilasters on low pedestals. Scattered farmhouses appear to have retained central chimney plan until c. 1810-1820, after which a nearly equal number of twin chimney and rear-wall chimney plan houses were built with simple decorative details. A small number of rear-wall chimney and end-chimney plan cottages were built near the end of the period. Generally, cottages were slightly more common in village locations; former mill villages houses had a greater variety of scale and plan, including some possible former boarding houses.

Institutional:

Six school districts until increased to 7 in 1819 and 8 in 1820; most school houses were one-story brick buildings. Private insane asylum established, 1818; building appearance unknown.

Commercial:

Few, if any, specialized commercial buildings likely to have built, except for several taverns including one three-story brick inn of unique Federalist design (South Pond).

Industrial:

Wood-frame mills built on several water power sites. Frame paper mill constructed 1818 (burned, 1841).

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Nashua River is corridor north/south for New Hampshire railroads with

Worcester and Nashua (1848) on east bank through East Pepperell with branch to Four Corners over river.

B. Population:

Rapid growth of population between 1830 and 1860, followed by decline during the Civil War. Foreign-born population (9% of total population in 1865) made up mainly of Irish immigrants after c. 1845-50. New religious societies included the Evangelical Congregational Society (1832); Methodist Society (present 1855, organized 1866).

C. Settlement Location:

Continued development of Pepperell Center; village developed on both sides of the Nashua River at East Pepperell; loosely scattered villages built up around Four Corners.

D. Economic Base:

By 1837 three paper mills produced \$25,000 worth of product; domestic shoe production at same product value. By 1855 these figures had risen to \$85,600 and \$53,100. Fourdanier paper machines introduced at Emerson Mill c. 1834. Blake family established machine shop and grist mills at Hollis Street, 1835; remained successful into 20th century. Sheffield-trained Aaron Burkinshaw built cutlery factory (Blood Street) with mill village of English workers, c. 1850 (?).

E. Architecture

Residential:

Very little (if any) high-style built. Housing at town center consisted mainly of side-hall Greek Revival and Italianate style houses, several center-entrance Italianate style houses and a small number of cottages. Similar sorts of houses were built at East Pepperell and Four Corners, although the majority of houses in these locations were side-hall plan, gable-facade cottages; in addition, the latter two villages contained several wood-frame boarding houses and row-house tenements (Greek Revival style). Second Empire style architecture was nearly absent.

Institutional:

Greek Revival style meetinghouse built for Evangelical Congregational Society (1832); First Parish Meetinghouse remodelled in Greek Revival style (1836); Italianate style church built for Evangelical Congregational Society (1860). Eight school districts until increased to 9 in 1849 and 10 in 1857; one-story brick school houses built throughout period (Italianate style c. 1855-70). Pepperell Academy founded 1833-34, built a transitional Federal/Greek Revival style, two-story wood-frame school house; private boys' boarding school founded 1850, private girls' boarding schools founded 1852, both closed by Civil War--build-ings unknown. Private insane asylum built new hospital, 1853, appearance unknown.

Commercial:

Commercial development probably restricted to East Pepperell where one and two-story wood-frame blocks may have been built; one railroad station built at East Pepperell (formerly Groton) prior to 1870.

Industrial:

Existing mills rebuilt and enlarged at East Pepperell--appearance and plans not recorded; mill at North Pepperell gradually passed out of use.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Secondary railroad to Milford, New Hampshire along Nashua and Nissitisset by late 19th century through Pepperell with remaining spur and period depot (now abandoned way). No street railway routes to Pepperell.

B. Population:

Steady increase, until 1900, after which population declined throughout the remainder of the period. Foreign-born population rose to a peak in 1905 (19% of the total population); declined proportionately to the decline in total population, thereafter; the largest foreign-born group was Irish although a large number of Canadians was present after c. 1895 and a small Russian population was established in the early twentieth century. Catholic Mission established 1871, became a parish 1881.

C. Settlement Locations:

Same as preceding period although with a slight tendency for Pepperell Center and East Pepperell to grow together along Main Street (c. 1890-1910).

D. Economic Base:

Paper and shoe production remained dominant manufacture with 3 paper mills and large Leighton shoe factory (1868) on Main Street. Paper industry, period of great expansion mid-1860s to 1890s. Paper production and employment made up more than half of the town's totals for all manufacturing, and shoes and paper together accounted for more than 80% (Flight). Both seriously affected by depression of 1893, going through periods of stagnation thereafter.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Relatively little high-style built; the most ambitious houses of the period were Queen Anne and Colonial Revival style houses of c. 1890-1910 built at the periphery of Pepperell Center, some of these may have been built as summer/country houses. Slightly simpler side-hall plan houses of late Italianate, Victorian Gothic and Queen Anne style design were built along Main Street in between East Pepperell and Pepperell Center. Housing in industrial villages was dominated by side-hall plan gable-facade cottages of simple Italianate/Victorian Gothic style design.

Institutional:

Methodist Chapel built 1873 (appearance not recorded); Catholic Chapel built 1871, enlarged to Church 1881 (appearance not recorded). Gradual consolidation of schools may have occurred in early 1890s when several wood-frame Queen Anne style school houses were built; the Colonial Revival/Queen Anne style Shattuck Street school house built 1898. Italianate/Victorian Gothic style Town Hall built 1873-1874, Second Empire style firehouse built at East Pepperell, c. 1880 (?). Library built 1901.

Commercial:

Small district of wood and brick row buildings (one- and two-stories) built at East Pepperell with individual examples of the Italianate style (c. 1875), late Victorian/Gothic/utilitarian (c. 1890-95) and Beaux Arts Classical (c. 1910). A second small commercial district developed along Main Street immediately west of the Nashua River; this area contained several free-standing wood-frame structures (Italianate and Victorian Gothic styles) with store fronts at the first story and, perhaps, housing above.

Industrial:

Major development of period was the rebuilding of mills at East Pepperell during the 1870s-1880s, and early twentieth century; new construction was largely utilitarian in design, built of brick, two and three-stories high. Manufacturing at North Pepperell ceased altogether in 1889.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of Milford railroad by mid-20th century and improvement of local highways as autoroads including primary east/west Route 119 from Groton and Routes 113 and 111 through Pepperell Center and East Pepperell.

B. Population:

Steady increases occurred after a low of 2,468 was reached in 1920; population at the end of the period did not exceed the town's population in 1900. Information for foreign-born population and new religious societies is not recorded in secondary sources.

C. Settlement Location:

No major changes in settled areas; summer hotels and boarding houses reportedly declined as automobiles came into widespread use during the 1920s.

D. Economic Base:

Manufacturing dominated by paper industry alone. No significant new industries. Agricultural production rising at last recorded date (1905) with 205 farms. Hydroelectric plant with pressure conduit built for paper mill.

E. Architecture

Residential:

New residential development was mostly modest in scale consisting of some Bungalow and Colonial Revival style cottages. Although one secondary source (Conklin, History of the Middlesex County) reported the development of some country estates during this period, it seems most likely that country estates which were formed, generally made use of existing Colonial and Federal Period houses.

Institutional:

No new development recorded, although some new school construction seems likely to have occurred.

Commercial:

Possible development of one-story store fronts in existing commercial locations, although little new development is evident.

Industrial:

Expansion of existing mill--brick and concrete utilitarian design--no new mills developed.

XI. SOURCES

Butler, Caleb, History of the Town of Groton 1848
Flight, Wilson R., ed. A Pepperell Reader 1976